

Differentiation Between Sarcasm and Cynicism

Barbara Ziegler

“THE WORLD IS going to Hell in a basket!” emphatically states the cynic. He believes that human conduct is directed solely by self-interest or self-indulgence, for cynicism tells its believers to be contemptuous of man’s sincerity of motives and the integrity of his conduct. Cynicism may allow its followers to stop at this point, or it may become so thoroughly integrated that one carries his convictions on until he becomes convinced that men are hopelessly lost. At this point he advances to the misanthropic stage. A misanthrope is a hater of mankind. Not only has he a deep-rooted disbelief of his fellow men, but he also has an aversion to their society. Cynicism need not reach this latter stage to be classified as a dreadful plague. It spreads quickly. It permeates all who come in contact with it with the same gnawing and persistent feeling of disbelief and doubt experienced by the cynic. Unfortunately, in some sets, cynicism is “smart,” just as atheism is “smart.” The cynic’s words seem to ring of wisdom, but this is because it is easier to be convincingly cynical than reassuringly optimistic. With the large number of professed cynics in the world, it is too bad cynicism cannot be a constructive building material—a foundation for improvement; instead, cynicism tears down and offers no substitute for the ruins it has left.

Some people have confused cynicism with sarcasm. The essential quality of sarcasm is taunting reproachfulness; it is always cutting and ill-natured. The sarcastic person seems to be looked upon with even greater esteem than the cynical person. I have known persons to swell with pride when someone has said, “I must admit you are a master of sarcasm.” What must one do to “master” this seemingly desirable quality? One must practice faithfully the use of bitter, caustic, or stinging remarks. One must have contempt for some object, whether it be mankind in general or one type of man in particular. One must at all times be intent upon wounding the feelings and must become sensitive to some shortcoming and use sarcasm as the offense, yet profess complete indifference to one’s own failures. One must hurt for the sake of hurting. Of course, these practices may eventually entail a loss of values to the faithful adherent of the training program. One may forget how to accept a compliment, or how to carry on a serious and intelligent conversation. One might lose friends, at first slowly and then more rapidly as the

sting of the tongue is felt by more and more. Yes, eventually one might have a comeback for everything, but will have no audience on which to "come back."

Both sarcasm and cynicism demand a contemptuous feeling on the part of their adherents, but here the similarity ends. Cynicism is a moral sentiment; sarcasm is a means of expressing this sentiment. Cynicism is a serious threat to the security of the nation. Its presence can undermine the will of the nation for peace. Sarcasm is a serious threat to the popularity of the individual practicing it. Sarcasm may upon occasion be humorous; cynicism is never humorous; it is always dangerous.

Two Poems

Frances King

Ballad for a Boy at His Sister's Wedding

Do not linger on the stair,
Breathing in the heather air,
Witches in the corner stand,
Bending now to take your hand.

Do not follow them so near,
Though they say you must not fear.
Note the little silver chains
And the gleaming golden reins.

Dark the tamarack will grow,
Softer than the candle glow.
Ah, my dear, it's getting late.
There's the river that you hate.

Now they flutter round your face,
Foam and laughter, foam and lace,
Still above the running dark,
Dimly hear the crowd of larks.

Larks upon the branches sit,
Raveling out their song in bits,
Casting rings for you to clasp,
Vows and promises to grasp.

But the rings and whispered vows,
Only swifter currents rouse,
Swift will rise the parting lark,
Leaving you the running dark.